

This article first appeared in *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, volume 52, issue 3, 2016, pp. 359-371. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449855.2016.1140069>

Version: Author's post-print

Anna-Leena Toivanen

### **Failing Cosmopolitanism: Aborted Transnational Journeys in the Novels by Monique Ilboudo, Sefi Atta, and Aminata Sow Fall**

The present article adopts a critically attuned understanding of cosmopolitanism in its reading of Monique Ilboudo's *Le mal de peau* (2001/1992), Sefi Atta's *Swallow* (2010), and Aminata Sow Fall's *Douceurs du bercail* (1998). My reading focuses on the ways in which imaginings of cosmopolitan futures and ideals become compromised through the trope of aborted transnational journey. All these works draw attention to the complexities of the postcolonial condition and such sequels to the colonial project as political instability of the postcolony, unevenness of globalization, and African immigration to Europe. With respect to the theme of transnational travel that the texts address, it is noteworthy that airports and airplanes, which are supposed to "build the backbone of the cosmopolitan society" (Beck 2008, 33), are invested with quite opposite meanings as sites where the hindrances in the way of cosmopolitanism become realized. The trope of aborted transnational journey has gendered dimensions in the novels: it is in the intimacy of the female body that the meanings of failing cosmopolitanism become inscribed.

Keywords: Atta; cosmopolitanism; globalization; Ilboudo; mobility; Sow Fall

#### **Obstacles in the way of a cosmopolitan future**

Cosmopolitanism is a complex concept that can be invested with various meanings. In the context of postcolonial studies, it may connote anything from the elitist travelling position of a world citizenry such as in Taiye Selasi's (2005) commodity-oriented understanding of Afropolitanism<sup>i</sup> to an utopian, future-oriented condition of global community (Spencer 2011, 4), and to an already existing, practical reality with the global manifesting its presence in the local (Mbembe 2008, 109). Besides these elitist, ethico-utopian and practical understandings, cosmopolitanism may also entail critical activity in the form of paying attention to contemporary

issues that disturb cosmopolitan orientations from being realized. In other words, critical cosmopolitanism expands the meanings of traditional cosmopolitanisms with their ideals of world citizenship and openness to diversity to “a negative critique of the structural obstacles and relations of domination preventing such ideals from being presently achieved” (Kurasawa 2011, 280). In the globalized present, not everyone has an equal possibility “to exercise the rights entailed by being a citizen of the globe” or to enjoy the freedom of movement associated with a liberal cosmopolitan position oblivious of the limits set by such markers of difference as gender, race, and class (Kurasawa 2011, 280, 283). The task of critical cosmopolitanism is, then, twofold: to criticize liberal cosmopolitanisms and the existing world order (Kurasawa 2011, 290).

I adopt such a critically attuned understanding of cosmopolitanism and concentrate on the failures of cosmopolitan ideals in my analysis of the following African female-authored novels: *Le mal de peau* (2001/1992) by the Burkinese Monique Ilboudo, *Douceurs du bercail* (1998) by the Senegalese Aminata Sow Fall, and finally, *Swallow* (2010) by the third-generation Nigerian diasporic writer Sefi Atta. In their vision and their ways of dealing with the mobility theme from a gender-specific perspective, all these texts can be considered feminist. While I also take into account of the practical, elitist, and ethico-utopian aspects of cosmopolitanism that the texts articulate, my main focus is on its critical dimensions. This means foregrounding the obstacles in the way of a truly cosmopolitan future – a theme that the three novels embody in their use of the aborted journey trope. The travel trope is particularly pertinent because “mobility is the essence of cosmopolitanism” (Sheller 2011, 349). Yet, mobility *alone* cannot be regarded as an enabler of a cosmopolitan perspective (Gikandi 2010, 24). Simon Gikandi (2010, 24-26) underlines that not all travelling subjects are willing or able to embrace cosmopolitan ideals. The lack of

willingness or ability to embrace cosmopolitan ideals is also a theme that surfaces in the text corpus.

In the contemporary globalized world, airports and airplanes form an important network of travel. They bring distanced, connected places closer to each other and enhance cultural encounters (Sheller & Urry 2006, 219). Such networks can be seen to “build the backbone of the cosmopolitan society” (Beck 2008, 33). However, airports and airplanes that figure in the novels are invested with quite opposite meanings: instead of being elements that would truly enable cosmopolitanism, they operate as sites where the obstacles in the way of cosmopolitan futures and ideals become realized.

### **Crushing reconciliation in *Le mal de peau***

With the publication of the novel *Le mal de peau*, Monique Ilboudo became the first female writer in her native Burkina-Faso. In 1992 this landmark novel was awarded *Le Grand Prix de l'Imprimerie Nationale du Meilleur Roman* in a national writing contest, while in 2001 it was published in France by Le Serpent à Plumes, which means that the novel also has since gained an international readership. The novel has received critical attention in the form of a concise monograph (Tibiri 2012) and scientific articles (e.g., Scott 2003; Tchumkam 2012). While the author – also engaged in human rights activism and the political life of Burkina-Faso – is certainly an important public figure in her national context, on the basis of the scant attention paid to *Le mal de peau*, the novel hardly features on the list of canonized African literature.

*Le mal de peau* is narrated from the viewpoint of two women, Sibila and Cathy, a mother and daughter. The chapters alternate between their narratives so that those revolving around Sibila focus temporarily on the past and spatially on the imaginary African country of Tinga, whereas Cathy's accounts concentrate on the narrative present and her life in the French

diaspora. Through this oscillation, the novel conveys an understanding of “the similarity between Africa under colonial rule and independent, free Africa” (Tchumkam 2012, 170; my translation). The technique also juxtaposes the geographically disparate zones of the postcolony and the former colonial mother country that become interconnected through their common past and mobility. The mobility aspect is discussed through the figure of Cathy who leaves her home country in order to pursue her studies in Paris. France represents the colonial father not only figuratively, but also concretely: Cathy is a child of a rape by a French colonial district officer, who returned to France shortly after his assault on Sibila. By going to France, Cathy nourishes somewhat implausible hopes of finding her father. Eventually, this far-fetched twist of plot becomes realized, and Cathy’s and her father’s destinies become entangled.

The novel opens with a scene situated in the “non-place” (see Augé 1995) of an Air Afrique flight on its descent into Paris Roissy Airport. Cathy, with her naïve astonishment at having already arrived and her basket full of “cacahuètes, salées, sucrées, bouillies, grillées, son gombo pilé, ses ‘feuilles séchées’, et surtout ses deux ou trois kilos de ‘bassi’ que sa mère avait si amoureusement préparés” (11-12) “salted, sweet, stewed, roasted peanuts, her mashed okra, her ‘dried leaves’, and above all the two or three kilos of ‘bassi’ that her mother had prepared with love” (personal translation here and for all quotes from Ilboudo’s novel) embodies an embarrassing aspect of provinciality in the metropolitan French context of experienced world travellers. Cathy manages to drop her peanut packages in the aisle, thus disturbing other passengers on their way out. This clumsy expression of provinciality and the fact that it is witnessed by other passengers promises a stumbling start for the travelling cosmopolitan position that Cathy has newly embraced.

Both Cathy's sense of belonging and her potential world citizenship are constantly questioned by the fact of being of mixed-race origin. Cathy is not at home either in her home country or in Paris: for the former, she is too white, and for the latter, too black. Yet, there are also moments when Paris makes Cathy feel at home: she sees Paris as a "ville cosmopolite" (57) "cosmopolitan city", and is happy to walk around the city, enjoying the luxury of anonymity enabled by the "indifférence générale" (62) "general indifference" of the crowd. Cathy's travelling position makes it thus occasionally possible for her to escape the burden of racialization. In this sense, there may be an element of true cosmopolitanism in this experience of indifference. Obviously, such an experience of cosmopolitan world citizenship is rather shallow and also extremely ephemeral. The idea that a black African subject can embrace a cosmopolitan identity only because of others' indifference is somewhat discouraging: it suggests that cosmopolitan world citizenship is primarily coded as white and European or Western.

The intercultural love-affair between Cathy and the French Régis serves as a terrain for discussing the limits that such cosmopolitan ideals as openness to otherness face in profoundly racialized France. Régis' mother, Mme de Montbrison, opposes the romance between her son and "la Noire", as she pejoratively refers to Cathy. She maintains that she has nothing against black people, yet claims simultaneously that "j'estime que chacun doit rester à sa place" (159) "I believe that everyone ought to stay in his place." Mme de Montbrison's colonialist and racist attitudes towards Cathy are far from cosmopolitan ideals, and in particular the idea of people having specific "places" where they should stay is problematic in this respect. Mme de Montbrison is concerned about the racial hygiene of her family tree, hence giving articulation to the colonial anxiety about hybridity (see Young 1995, 4). Mme de Montbrison's attitudes towards Cathy can be read as an allegory of French racism towards African immigrants, blaming

their presence in the metropolitan space for the social problems the country is facing: Mme de Montbrison thinks that “seule Cathy était responsable de la tragédie qu’elle vivait” (158) “Cathy alone was responsible for the tragedy she was living.”

In effect, the whole novel lends itself easily to an allegorical reading. For instance, the rape imagery is closely connected to colonialism, and the fact that Cathy is born the same year as her home country became independent also supports an allegorical interpretation. The figure of Cathy embodies the challenges of a postcolony in search for an identity after decolonization. Moreover, in metropolitan France, Cathy’s presence functions as a reminder of the French colonial legacy and the “amnesia” that affects the nation’s relation to its colonial past (see Moura 2008, 266). The idea of an unaddressed past is most strongly manifested in Cathy’s relation to her father Henri Lemer cier with whom she eventually becomes acquainted, thanks to an unconvincing narrative turn that places Lemer cier as an acquaintance of Cathy’s friend’s aunt. The first encounter between the father and the daughter takes place during an organized dinner. The figure of Lemer cier is made to bear the shame generated by the French colonial project. His efforts to forget the shameful act of sexual violence and the fact that he is unaware of his descendant are in parallel with the colonial amnesia on a national scale. Lemer cier, however, aims for reconciliation, starting with acknowledging Cathy as his daughter. Cathy, as the colonial bastard daughter, accepts her father’s efforts, but also finds his remorse sometimes displaced:””Se racheter ! Réparer ! Il n’a que ces mots à la bouche !’ songea Cathy [...]. Ces mots lui semblaient tellement vides, sans aucun rapport avec la situation (239)” “”To redeem himself! To fix! That’s all he has to say!’ thought Cathy [...]. These words seemed so empty to her, without any connection to the situation.” While emphasizing that the violence of the colonial project cannot be undone simply by regretting and apologizing, the narrative also suggests that

resentment and vengeance are not right ways to deal with the problematic past, either. This comes through in a passage where Cathy dreams that her father is dying and that she is involved in his death, her mother saying to her, “Pourquoi as-tu fait ça ma fille ? Ne sais-tu pas que la vengeance est stérile ?” (211) “Why did you do that, my daughter? Don’t you know that revenge is fruitless?” This dream scene conveys a utopian idea of a truly cosmopolitan future where both the colonizer and the colonized have moved beyond feelings of guilt and vindictiveness – an aspiration that the novel’s narrative closure efficiently undermines.

The ultimate gesture towards reconciliation between the father and the daughter is their decision to travel to Tinga to meet Sibila and to officially acknowledge the paternal tie. When reading it from an allegorical perspective, the journey is invested with hopeful promises regarding the cosmopolitan future. This utopian gesture, however, fails on its own impossibility as the journey that Cathy, Henri Lemerrier, and Régis undertake is fatally interrupted. The airplane they take is also boarded by Tingalese terrorists who fight for a local liberation movement. As the terrorists detonate a bomb, the hopeful itinerary of reconciliation comes to an end. The image of a crashing airplane epitomizes the complexity of the postcolonial present and the insurmountable inheritance of the colonial project. By discussing terrorism, the novel also points out that many contemporary social and political problems have a global impact, and that a nationally limited approach to deal with them is insufficient – an important aspect of the cosmopolitan perspective as well. Moreover, the terrorist attack also underlines the fact that failures of decolonization may generate a breeding ground for violent nationalisms that may be as remote from cosmopolitan ideals and ethics as colonialist and racist antagonist ideologies. The crashing plane, carrying the tension between the future-oriented gesture of reconciliation and the

terrorist attack as a violent corollary of the colonial project and failed decolonization, is a powerful trope conveying the idea of the obstacles in the way of a truly cosmopolitan future.

### ***Swallow*: Entrails globalized**

As paradigmatic to third-generation African writing, Sefi Atta's *Swallow* is less directly concerned with the colonial past, focusing instead on the logic of globalization and its effects on an African postcolony – in this case, Nigeria (see Thomas 2009, 230). Yet, *Swallow* fights against some central assumptions of the third-generation literary paradigm by articulating a nation-based focus (Gagiano 2013, 48-49). The novel's title alludes to drug smuggling in which the protagonist Tolani and her friend Rose become involved: their task is to swallow condoms filled with cocaine in order to transport them in their bodies to the UK. While the title of the novel seems to foreground the drug-smuggling theme, the event itself is addressed in a desultory manner. The risky journey that Rose finally undertakes alone – Tolani failing to swallow the condoms – is addressed briefly and from a certain distance, as Tolani learns about Rose's death accidentally in a newspaper. This narrative strategy suggests that the novel is less concentrated on *what* happens than on *why* it happens. While the novel's events are set in the mid-1980s, its theme remains extremely topical. In interview Atta has said that she acquired the inspiration for the novel – and also for the short story entitled "Last trip", which addresses the same topic – from newspaper articles about drug mules (Anyia 2008). In effect, in its cursory treatment of the act of drug smuggling itself and its focus on the context that drives people to such illegal pursuits, *Swallow* seems to be ironically revisiting the kind of short newspaper articles that simply announce the "facts" about a crime without delving deeper into the social reasons and consequences underlying the phenomenon. The novel has received principally positive critiques



that praise the psychological complexity of the female characters and the eloquent style that it uses to narrate ordinary life. The critical reception of *Swallow* has highlighted the ways in which this diasporic novel, while profoundly critical, also articulates an engagement with and affinity toward the postcolonial African nation (see Gagliano 2013; Nwiyi 2014).

Tolani and Rose both work in a bank, and are sexually harassed by their boss, Mr. Salako. When Rose slaps him and is fired, Tolani is promoted to her position only to become the next object of his abusive conduct. The sexual harassment leading to Rose's dismissal is the initiatory force that makes her consider drug smuggling. Another motive can be found in the consumer culture with its endless temptations, embodied in the novel by the shoe trope. OC, the man with whom Rose becomes involved and who persuades her to smuggle drugs, offers her a pair of shoes that her former boyfriend had refused to buy. Mr. Salako and OC represent the patriarchal and corrupt aberrations of contemporary Nigerian society, either taking advantage of their own high position or the economic plight of women. Here, women's bodies become sites of abuse that the women cannot claim entirely their own, since they are reduced to mere objects or vehicles for the abusers' purposes.

The trope of swallowing, with its connotations of oral sex with a woman as a giving party, captures the women's accommodation to patriarchal misuse of power. This becomes clear in Tolani's case, who, after being harassed by Mr. Salako, leaves his office and "closed the door gently, like an obedient daughter" (86). Rose puts this submission into words by stating that "Whatever happens to us, we accept it as normal. We even laugh about it, as if it is funny. I mean, what a life" (229). In effect, life, for Tolani and Rose and the majority of people around them, consists of "coping" (207). Many seem to be involved in some suspicious activity in order to support themselves: Tolani's friend Johnny Walker gives vague answers when Tolani tries to

discover the truth about his livelihood in a dubious “import, export” business (143); Rose’s sister Violet, who worked as a prostitute in Italy, came back to Lagos to open a hair salon. There is, in this sense, a profoundly global dimension embedded in the Lagosian locality: a phenomenon that could be described as “practical cosmopolitanism”, a non-elitist form of cosmopolitanism carried by *petits migrants* such as prostitutes and traders (Mbembe 2008, 109). Indeed, unlike Ilboudo, Atta is not particularly interested in the ethico-utopian dimensions of cosmopolitanism, but rather in its mundane, long-established manifestations that give articulation to processes of transculturation enhanced by the increased travel typical to the global era.

The novel gives articulation to the social divisions that mark Nigerian society. There are the “ordinary people”, coping by whatever means possible in order to maintain the fragile balance of not becoming a total outcast: to allude to the shoe trope employed in the novel, anyone could be in Rose’s shoes, smuggling drugs to make money. There is a generally accepted mindset according to which the source of one’s livelihood is not a matter of shame, but being poor is, as Rose explains to Tolani when she presents her the plan of becoming a drug mule. Then there are those who are better off, uninterested in the political and social problems of the country as long as “their Ferragamo and Fendi” (200) are safe. Indeed, the lives of people like Rose do not have much value in the society that Atta portrays. Illustrative of this attitude is that while Rose asks, “do I look like someone who is careless enough to risk her life for money?” (141), OC is much less concerned about the lives of his female drug-mules than about his own risk of getting caught.

The fatal journey that Rose undertakes contrasts with more privileged forms of mobility to which the narrative also alludes. Rose’s figure stands in a stark opposition to the postcolonial elite – an elite consisting of people who, in the event of a national crisis, “would be trying to **get**

on the next flight out” (200). In Rose’s decision, there is also an element of wanting to taste the pleasures of the travelling cosmopolitan elite: “Let me first go where people are civilized, and for once on a plane that doesn’t shake” (238). The fact that a middle-class Nigerian woman can claim a cosmopolitan travelling identity solely by becoming a drug smuggler is a bleakly ironic reminder of the limits of cosmopolitanism – limits manifesting themselves in terms of class, gender, and racial differences, and often inscribed on the materiality of the body, as Atta’s novel suggests in a very concrete manner. Here, the reason for the journey to fail does not lie in the vehicle or the co-passengers as in *Le mal de peau*, but in the traveller’s body that refuses its role as a drug container. Tolani learns about Rose’s destiny in a newspaper: “The woman had convulsed and later died at Gatwick Airport when a balloon of cocaine burst inside” (246-247). Tolani escapes Rose’s condition thanks to her body’s refusal to swallow the drugs, a form of resistance despite herself. In the novel, drug smuggling is a gendered phenomenon, the mules mostly women who “appeared in the news-papers”, and who, according to Tolani, are “like prostitutes” (138-139), with the difference that the latter “used condoms to save their lives” (140). The newspaper reduces Rose to one of “those women” (138) as people refer to female drug mules, and her non-identity is emphasized by the fact that she travelled under a falsified passport with the name “Sidi Raheem” (246) on it.

The novel’s ending gestures towards a change of direction in the protagonist’s life when, as a result of OC’s intimidations, Tolani leaves Lagos and joins her mother in the countryside. Her mother is a cloth printer, and Tolani is planning to work with her. While the future of her plans remains open, the ending suggests at least a temporarily withdrawal from the Lagosian urban life and its sexist and consumerist patterns. The sexist and consumerist elements that initially drove Rose to undertake the risky journey now motivate Tolani’s withdrawal from the

globalized urban life towards an existence that is more open to negotiations with tradition, yet without an element of parochialism or facile romanticism.

*Swallow* does not nurture hopes of a cosmopolitan future; it is far too concerned with current problems of dysfunctional Nigeria, a country that does not have much agential possibilities to offer for modern urban women. The laconically humoristic tone conveys this non-utopian effect. Besides the national and the local scales, the novel also addresses the global world order and the way in which it takes advantage of the predicament of those situated in “the ‘wastelands’ of transnational operations of neocolonial globalization” (Yeğenoğlu 2005, 104). The global is profoundly embedded in the Lagosian locality, which can be considered to be the prerequisite for cosmopolitan practices. Here, however, the presence of “elsewhere” in the local urban space pertains mostly to consumer products and dubious livelihoods created at the intersection of the local and the global. Ironically enough, the realities portrayed in the novel come closest to the cosmopolitan ideals of boundary-crossing dialogue and responsibility in a passage where Tolani is concerned about Westerners who take drugs smuggled by women like Rose and herself. Tolani feels responsible for their drug use and asks Rose, “Are we...encouraging them?” (205) – a question that the pragmatically oriented Rose fends off by posing a new question, “How?”, and suggesting that drugs are used by rich white people who “want to be cool” (205). The grotesque culmination of the transcultural contact enabled by drug smuggling is captured in Rose’s realization: “Only God knows whether they will feel so cool when they know their drugs have been up an African woman’s yansh” (205). Atta’s ironic representation of already existing cosmopolitanisms – which often simultaneously display the failures of truly cosmopolitan ideals to achieve their realization in the present – contains an embodied, grotesque dimension.

A less ironic lesson of cosmopolitan attitude and responsibility is given by Tolani's late father who had taught his daughter to acknowledge her place as a part of the human community: "You are not special. There are many like you in this world. Do not consider your good fortune as a blessing or their bad fortune a curse. It could easily be the other way around" (161). The father's lessons imply that cosmopolitan awareness is not necessarily a matter of transnational mobility, but one of acknowledging one's own positionality and of being capable of placing oneself in the position of an other – regardless of the other's national and other affiliations. His words also point toward the fragility of one's position in the society portrayed by the novel.

### **Retreat to the local in *Douceurs du bercail***

While Aminata Sow Fall is not a third-generation author, the thematic issues that *Douceurs du bercail* discusses resonate with the paradigm characterized by its emphasis on mobility. Indeed, while its publication dates back to almost twenty years from the present, the novel remains timely in the current world situation, which includes increasing numbers of aspiring African migrants trying to reach Europe. The issue of "*les charters de la honte*" ("charters of shame") was topical at the time of the novel's publication: laws in France restricting immigration resulted in increasing cases of repatriation of undocumented immigrants. This phenomenon was also addressed by Alain Mabanckou's novel *Bleu-blanc-rouge* (1998) and Nathalie Etoke's *Un amour sans papiers* (1999) – which is an interesting coincidence, given that Sow Fall has claimed that she first wrote the novel as long ago as in 1981 (Gueye 2013). While the novel's theme of mobility is a central element in third-generation African writing, it has to be emphasized that Sow Fall's approach is closer to the anticolonial/oppositional type than that of the postcolonial novel, as my analysis suggests. Moreover, the explicit political commitment of

her production also ties her to the second wave of African literature. Texts by third-generation authors, such as Sefi Atta, tend to be much more subtle in their expressions of political engagement. The importance of Sow Fall's pronounced feminism can be fully appreciated by considering her literary output against its male-dominated literary historical context in Senegal. Sow Fall is "la grande royale" (Gueye 2013) not only of the Senegalese but also of the African literary field. Her work is also valued internationally, as *Le grand prix de la Francophonie*, which was awarded to the author by the French Academy in 2015, attests. The critical reception of *Douceurs du bercail* – one of Sow Fall's lesser-known works – has focused on its womanist/feminist politics (Anih 2013; Mabana 2007), migration (Sarr 2013), and various aspects of tradition and myth (Mortimer 2007; Thompson 2003).

As to the protagonist of *Douceurs du bercail*, there is nothing in her travelling condition that would predict the failure of her itinerary: she comes across as a privileged cosmopolitan world citizen. Significantly, Asta Diop is on a business trip to Paris in order to attend a conference on the topic "l'Ordre Economique Mondial" (18), equipped with all the necessary documents to avoid any problem with the immigration officers at the airport. Asta's belonging to the Dakarian urban middle class is compared to the situation of illegal immigrants who are expelled from France. In contrast to her less fortunate compatriots, Asta leads a satisfactory life in her home country thanks to her social position. Her privilege articulates itself in a discussion she has with aspiring emigrants during the flight. Unlike her interlocutors, Asta can afford the pride to claim, "S'il m'expulsaient, je ne reviendrais plus" (9) "If they expelled me, I wouldn't come back" (personal translation here and for all quotes from Sow Fall's novel), or to suggest that with the money spent on the flight tickets, the *clandestins* could establish a small business in Senegal – a proposition rejected by the latter, "Y a plus rien au pays" (9) "There is nothing back

home.” Unlike the illegal immigrants who are on their own in their attempt to enter France and who live in overpopulated apartments, Asta does not lack options as to where to stay: besides her hotel accommodation, she has a room at her disposal in her friend’s house. Asta is portrayed as an African traveller, not an aspiring migrant: she is a friend and a hotel customer who has no intention to stay permanently. The narrative repeatedly highlights the fact that Asta should not be confused with “the rejects of failed states” (Gikandi 2010, 23) that the *clandestins* represent. Through such an emphasis, the narrative ends up constructing an evaluative outlook of African mobilities that condemns non-elitist, “practical” forms of cosmopolitanisms that generate “clandestine spaces” (see Mbembe 2008, 109). Sow Fall’s message in this novel is strongly marked by an anti-emigration ideology: the narrative voice opposes economic migration and the romanticized images of Europe nurtured by aspiring migrants.

As to the discrepancy between Asta’s privilege and her travelling companions’ lack thereof, it is nonetheless noteworthy that while the narrative insists on Asta being a “coquette impénitente” (8) “impenitent coquette”, there is a certain shabbiness in her appearance that denotes the potential fragility of her mobile subjectivity. This detail is particularly interesting in the sense that, in contemporary discussions on Afropolitanism, the question of style has become central. This can be observed in Taiye Selasi’s formulation of Afropolitanism, and also in the responses of those critical of it (see, e.g., Bosch Santana). A focus on style is obviously symptomatic of the privilege that a travelling cosmopolitan identity entails, and the fact that Asta for some reason fails to keep up with the standards of the cosmopolitan *chic*, is a troubling sign. Besides limping and carrying a bag “plein à craquer de crevettes séchées, de *bissap*, de *quinquéliba*” (7-8) “full to burst with dried shrimp, *bissap*, *quinquéliba*”, her clothes are wrinkled and untidy. The image of local foodstuff evokes Cathy’s provincialism in the airplane

passage in *Le mal de peau*. These innocent articulations of locality that Asta and Cathy bring back from their home countries to the French metropolitan space can be contrasted with the cocaine that Rose carries in her body as a more harmful outcome of globalization. Neither poorly packed local foodstuffs nor cocaine are the ingredients that would first come to mind in the construction of an effortless cosmopolitan travelling identity. By pointing out Asta's shabbiness, the narrative suggests a parallel between her and the *clandestins*, implying that in the eyes of the customs officers and other gate keepers of *la forteresse France*, Asta is as much a potential illegal immigrant as any black African. This idea is intensified by the fact that Asta is arrested and confined to the *dépôt* of the airport where illegal immigrants are held before repatriation. Asta is arrested because of her aggressive behaviour during a body search: her reaction to the humiliation is to attack a customs officer by trying to strangle her. The assault passage portrays the idea of resistance of the body: Asta's reaction is beyond her control. A similar effect of loss of controlled embodied identity is also conveyed by the fact that Anne does not recognize her friend in the newspaper photos. The body search passage and Asta becoming unidentifiable evokes Rose's destiny in *Swallow*, drawing attention to the fragility of the position of middle-class urban African women; Asta could be a drug smuggler just as easily, and any black African woman is a suspected drug mule.

Ana M<sup>a</sup> Manzanás and Jesús Benito Sánchez (2011, 112) maintain that "there is hardly any site where th[e] dialectics of location and dislocation is more explicit than at the thresholds of nations, especially if these thresholds intersect with non-places, rest areas, detention areas, and airport terminals." The idea of the airport as a national threshold is strongly conveyed in the novel. The threshold character of the airport, however, is not invested with liberating qualities. While the notion of threshold carries in it a promise of movement, in *Douceurs du bercail* it



represents an obstacle to stumble on and to disrupt the planned itinerary. Thus, it is the airport itself that both theoretically enables cosmopolitan encounters and that eventually condemns them to failure. The identity of a carefree world traveller is not something to be issued to a black African subject.

To reach the closed entry of the *dépôt*, one has to run “un marathon épouvantable entre terminaux, sous-sols, couloirs en spirale et retours au point de départ” (67) “a horrendous marathon between terminals, floors beyond ground level, spiral-shaped hallways and returns to the starting point.” In this sense, the *dépôt* stands in stark contrast to the consumerist façade of the airport with its inviting “mignonnes petites boutiques” “cute little shops” selling “[f]riandises, gadgets, souvenirs, tabac, livres, journaux” (68) “sweets, gadgets, souvenirs, tobacco, books, journals” to render the voyage of the carefree cosmopolitan traveller more pleasant. Indeed, the very existence of the *dépôt* exposes the shallowness of the airport’s liberal cosmopolitanism articulated in “[d]es couleurs, des nuances, des gestes et des rythmes à l’image de la diversité du monde” (30) “colours, nuances, gestures and rhythms reflecting the diversity of the world.”

Besides being hidden spatially, the *dépôt* also escapes temporality. Those confined to it lose their notion of time. The confusion related to temporality is antithetical to the importance granted to schedules in travel. In this sense, the *dépôt* represents an inherently contradictory condition of stasis-in-mobility that marks the limits of imagining a cosmopolitan future in the context of European anti-immigration policies. As a travesty of cosmopolitanism situated in the airport, the *dépôt* is a strongly racialized space, containing racial others posing a threat as potential immigrants to the French nationhood with their “manières qui ne cadrent pas exactement avec les leurs” (101) “ways that do not exactly conform with theirs.” If

cosmopolitanism denotes a state of being at home in the world (Brennan), then there is a truly unidirectional side to it in the Afro-European setting: whereas Europeans “déambulent [en Afrique] à leur aise” (45) “meander [in Africa] at ease”, African travellers’ itineraries are interrupted for no other obvious reason than a complexion that renders every black person a potential suspect.

While the condition of being detained gives rise to aggression and sexual violence, the *dépôt* experience also generates a sense of community. The *dépôt* is filled with young Africans who have no emotional affinity to their own country and who are in search of a better elsewhere. Asta does not believe in Eldorados and tries to make the aspiring immigrants see the possibilities in their countries of origin. In this respect, Sow Fall’s anti-emigration message bears a resemblance to that of such third-generation Francophone African female novelists as Fatou Diome (see Toivanen 2011, 73-74) or Nathalie Etoke. It is during her stay in the *dépôt*, a non-place lost in time, that she embraces the meanings of locality and tradition: “Au bout de l’aventure, il n’y a que le mirage... Aimons notre terre !” (53) “At the end of the adventure, there is only a mirage... Let’s love our land!” Asta’s dream of cultivating a land is not only a personal project, but also a communal one. Later, the reader finds several of the characters introduced in the *dépôt* chapters involved in Asta’s project as if to compensate their aborted journeys. It is noteworthy that Asta has her “awakening” in a context that is marked by a loss of identity and a sort of a sense of delusion resulting from sleep deprivation in the *dépôt* environment. Moreover, the notion of shame keeps recurring in the text, and it pertains to both the ways in which African travellers are treated by the French border authorities and the anti-immigration segments of French society in general, and to the repatriates’ concern about the harmful rumours that their return will generate at home. The *dépôt* experience reduces these mobile African subjects to

mere cattle, depriving them of individuality. The narrative emphasizes the deprivation of individuality by showing how Asta's surname Diop is badly spelled as "Diobe" in the newspapers that document her assault on the customs officer. This evokes the renaming of Rose as one of "those women" or "Sidi Raheem" in *Swallow*. The land project is an imminent reaction to this humiliation and erasure of identity.

While it is true that with her development project, Asta engages "a new female subjectivity located in a place beyond the double restriction of African patriarchy and European colonialism" (Mortimer 2007, 76) and the unequal elements of globalization, I would read the project as a withdrawal from cosmopolitan engagements, as it conveys a romanticized image of a return to traditional Africa. Indeed, this is where *Douceurs du bercail* differs from the third-generation African literary paradigm which is marked by a refusal "to construct Africa as a site of salutary return" (Adesanmi 2013, 321). In *Douceurs du bercail*, the narrative turns its back on the challenges that globalization poses to the continent and withdraws to an idealized locality, promoting a vision of the world where the local and the global are opposite forces. Asta's witnessing of the failure of cosmopolitan ideals to come into being drives her to withdraw from any further attempt to engage in a dialogue that would cross the boundaries of the local. Consequently, the novel adheres to an oppositional paradigm rather than to a postcolonial one. As Chilozone Eze (2014, 236) observes, recourse to the traditional and the autochthonous is a logical reaction in the fight against racist and colonialist discourses. However, the problem with this sort of an oppositional ideology "is that it does not have within it the means to extend the vision of the world beyond the essentialist enclave of African pristine villages" (Eze 2014, 236). This is exactly the gesture of closure that *Douceurs du bercail* performs.

Asta's withdrawal to locality and tradition is surprising in the sense that she is portrayed as someone with cosmopolitan sensibilities. Her "transnational friendship" (Mortimer 2007, 76) with Anne is a good example of an encounter that crosses boundaries. In Asta's mind, people being different "n'a jamais empêché les gens de vivre ensemble" (101) "has never stopped them from living together." She also believes that "[l]a conscience de sa propre identité est le meilleur garant d'une intégration fondée sur le respect de l'intégrité d'autrui" (185) "the awareness of one's own identity is the best guarantee for an integration based on respect of the integrity of others" – a stance that is markedly cosmopolitan in the way in which self-awareness is seen as a prerequisite for an encounter with Otherness. The novel also conveys the idea of cosmopolitan responsibility through the manifestations that arise in France as a reaction against the expulsions of the African *clandestins*. Ironically enough, towards the end of the story, the articulations of cosmopolitan sensibility are restricted to botany, as Asta and her team set out to diversify the local flora by cultivating plants from elsewhere. The plot becomes thus the only potential site for boundary-crossing encounters. The death of Asta's friend Anne – significantly only addressed in passing – signals the final closure for the narrative's cosmopolitan aspirations.

## Conclusion

Ilboudo's, Atta's and Sow Fall's novels address the theme of transnational travel from a viewpoint that emphasizes the fragile nature of travelling. In Ilboudo's and Atta's novels, travel has fatal consequences. Terrorism and drug smuggling that cause deaths in the two novels are by-products of a world order that, as a sequel to the colonial project, is marked by failures of decolonization and the continuous inequality between the West and the Global South. In *Douceurs du bercail*, the protagonist's interrupted journey leads to a retreat from the boundary-

crossing encounters that travel may entail. In *Swallow* a similar gesture of retreat is performed by Tolani, but there is nothing that final to it: the laconic humour helps the narrative to avoid sententious dead ends. Additionally, the lack of closure that marks the novel's ending implies a certain suspicion towards the possibility of return. *Douceurs du bercail*, in contrast, is almost too enthusiastic in its withdrawal to tradition and locality. The intensity with which the rural development project is cherished denotes a reaction against the humiliation to which African travellers are subjected by European border control apparatuses.

As to envisioning cosmopolitan futures, Ilboudo's novel invests the most hope in its aspirations for cosmopolitanism. *Le mal de peau* invites an allegorical reading, with the figure of Cathy standing for the complexities of the postcolonial condition. The narrative emphasizes the necessity of reconciliatory gestures on both sides of the (post)colonial divide. However, the possibility of a cosmopolitan future that the allegorical story nurtures falls prey to its own impossibility: the colonial project and failures of decolonization have generated sequels – such as terrorism – that replicate colonialism's oppositional patterns and turn down the possibility of imagining an alternative beyond them. In contrast to *Douceur du bercail* and to a certain extent, to *Swallow*, the aborted journey in *Le mal de peau* does not give rise to anything new; there is no turning point in the story, just the end of it. In light of the novel's narrative structure, which closes with the terrorist attack, the crash of cosmopolitan ideals undermines the possibility of any redemptive beyond. *Swallow* does not even engage in the effort of imagining better futures: it is too preoccupied with the obstacles of the here-and-now. There are elements that bespeak the co-existence of the local and the global in the novel, but there is a somewhat “grubby” side to them that maintains a certain, sometimes ironic distance to idealistic imaginings.

In these novels, the trope of aborted journey functions as a vehicle for dealing with issues pertaining to the diverse after-effects of colonialism in the global present. Significantly, the journeys are interrupted either at the airport or in the airplane, alleged “backbone[s] of the cosmopolitan society” (Beck 2008, 33). Such non-places and travel in general may enable liberating negotiations over one’s identity. In these novels, however, mobility generates negative forms of non-identity: Cathy becomes “la Noire”, Rose “one of those women” or “Sidi Raheem”, and Asta Diop “Asta Diobe”. All these renamings allude to an erasure of identity imposed on them by the oppressive structures that inform the context of their mobility. The novels adopt a gender-specific approach, displaying women’s bodies as the intimate, material sites on which the failures of cosmopolitanism find their expression: Cathy’s body is subjected to racist discourses and terrorism, Asta’s to the absurdities of European border control, and as a vehicle for drug smuggling, Rose’s body crystallizes under the asymmetrical effects of the global world order. With their representations of the limits of cosmopolitanism in the context of globalized postcoloniality, the novels challenge the typical formulations of world citizenship and ideals of effortless boundary crossings that remain blind to the workings of race, class, and gender. As the novels suggest, the gendered body plays a central role in the failures of a cosmopolitan world citizenship. In Ilboudo’s novel, Cathy’s racially othered body and its reproductive capacities lie at the core of the dilemma involved in “staying in one’s place”. In Sow Fall’s text, the body search to which Asta is subjected at the airport captures the idea of how the mobility of gendered black bodies is controlled physically. And finally, Atta’s novel articulates the low value assigned to African women’s bodies within the context of global mobile flows. In this way, the novels point out how contexts impose their restrictions on the cosmopolitan aspirations of certain embodied subjects. Speaking from their critical perspectives, these texts convey the idea that in

an ideal cosmopolitan society the gendered and racialized body would not stand in the way of cosmopolitan world citizenship. In *Le mal de peau*, *Swallow*, and *Douceurs du bercail*, the planned itineraries stumble on such legacies and structures that freeze the cosmopolitan condition to utopianism out of reach.

#### References:

- Adesanmi, Pius. 2013. "Redefining Paris: Transmodernity and Francophone African Migrant Fiction." In *Paris, Capital of the Black Atlantic: Literature, Modernity, and Diaspora*, edited by Jeremy Braddock and Jonathan P. Eburne, 312-329. Baltimore: John Hopkins UP.
- Anih, Uchenna Bethrand. 2013. "A Womanist Reading of *Douceurs du bercail* by Aminata Sow Fall." *Matatu* 41: 105-124.
- Anyia, Ike. 2008. "Interview with Sefi Atta." *Nigeria World*, 6 August. Available at: <http://nigeriaworld.com/feature/publication/anya/080608.html>
- Atta, Sefi. 2010. *Swallow*. Northampton: Interlink Books.
- Augé, Marc. 1995. *Non-places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*. London: Verso.
- Beck, Ulrich. 2008. "Mobility and the Cosmopolitan Perspective." In *Tracing Mobilities: Towards a Cosmopolitan Perspective*, edited by Weert Canzler, Vincent Kaufmann, and Sven Kesselring, 25-35. Aldershot & Burlington: Ashgate.
- Brennan, Timothy. 1997. *At Home in the World: Cosmopolitanism Now*. Cambridge & London: Harvard UP.

Eze, Chielozone. 2014. "Rethinking African Culture and Identity: The Afropolitan Model."

*Journal of African Cultural Studies* 26 (2): 234-247. doi:

10.1080/13696815.2014.894474.

Etoke, Natalie. 1999. *Un amour sans papiers*. Paris: Cultures Croisées.

Gagiano, Anne. 2013. "Women Writing Nationhood Differently: Affiliative Critique in

Novels by Forna, Atta, and Farah." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*

44 (1): 45-72.

Gikandi, Simon. 2010. "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of

Locality." In *Rerouting the Postcolonial: New Directions for the New Millennium*,

edited by Janet Wilson, Cristina Șandru, and Sarah Lawson Welsh, 22-35. London:

Routledge.

Gueye, Alassane Seck. 2013. "Aminata Sow Fall, Itinéraire Romanesque d'une Grande Royale."

*Afriquinfos*, 16 October. Available at:

<http://www.afriquinfos.com/articles/2013/10/16/aminata-fall-itineraire-romanesque-dune-grande-royale-234312.asp>

Ilboudo, Monique. 2001. *Le mal de peau*. Paris: Le Serpent à Plumes.

Kurasawa, Fuyuki. 2011. "Critical Cosmopolitanism." In *The Ashgate Research Companion*

*to Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Maria Rovisco and Magdalena Nowicka, 279-293. Surrey

& Burlington: Ashgate.

Mabana, Kahiudi Claver. 2007. "Aminata Sow Fall et la cause féminine." In *Emerging*

*Perspectives on Aminata Sow Fall: The Real and the Imaginary in Her Novels*, edited by

Ada Uzoamaka Azodo, 65-82. Trenton: Africa World Press.

Mabanckou, Alain. 1998. *Bleu-blanc-rouge*. Paris: Présence Africaine.



- Manzanas, Ana M<sup>a</sup>, and Jésus Benito Sanchez. 2011. *Cities, Borders, and Spaces in Intercultural American Literature and Film*. New York & London: Routledge.
- Mbembe, Achille. 2008. "The New Africans: Between Nativism and Cosmopolitanism." In *Readings in Modernity in Africa*, edited by Pierre Geschiere, Birgit Meyers, and Peter Pels, 107-111. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana UP.
- Mortimer, Mildred. 2007. "Domestic Matters: Representations of Home in the Writings of Mariama Bâ, Calixthe Beyala and Aminata Sow Fall." *International Journal of Francophone Studies* 10 (1-2): 67-83. doi: 10.1386/ijfs.10.1and2.67/1.
- Moura, Jean-Marc. 2008. "The Evolving Context of Postcolonial Studies in France: New Horizons or New Limits?" *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 44 (3): 263-274. doi: 10.1080/17449850802230319.
- Nwiyi, Joy. 2014. "Survival and Female (Ad)venturing in Sefi Atta's *Swallow*." *International Journal on Studies in English Language and Literature* 2 (9): 1-5. doi:
- Santana, Stephanie. 2012. "Exorcizing Afropolitanism: Binyavanga Wainaina explains why 'I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan.'" *Africa in Words*, 8 February. Available at: <http://africainwords.com/2013/02/08/exorcizing-afropolitanism-binyavanga-wainaina-explains-why-i-am-a-pan-africanist-not-an-afropolitan-at-asauk-2012/>
- Sarr, Awa C. 2013. "Au-delà du miroir: Réalisme-utopie et problématique de l'immigration dans *Douceurs du bercail* d'Aminata Sow Fall." *Nouvelles Etudes Francophones* 28 (1): 133-144. doi: 10.1353/nef.2013.0031
- Scott, Joyce Hope. 2003. "From Harlem to the Sahel: The Trope of the Mulatto in Monique Ilboudo's *Le mal de peau* and Nella Larsen's *Quicksand*." In *Camel Tracks: Critical*

- Perspectives on Sahelian Literature*, edited by Debra Boyd-Buggs and Joyce Hope Scott, 247-256. Trenton: Africa World Press.
- Selasi, Taiye. 2005. "Bye-Bye Babar." *The Lip*, 3 March. Available at:  
<http://thelip.robertsharp.co.uk/?p=76>
- Sheller, Mimi. 2011. "Cosmopolitanism and Mobilities." In *The Ashgate Research Companion to Cosmopolitanism*, edited by Maria Rovisco & Magdalena Nowicka, 349-365. Surrey & Burlington: Ashgate.
- Sheller, Mimi, and John Urry. 2006. "The New Mobilities Paradigm." *Environment and Planning* 38 (2): 207-226. doi:10.1068/a37268.
- Sow Fall, Aminata. 1998. *Douceurs du bercail*. Abidjan: Nouvelles Editions Ivoiriennes.
- Spencer, Robert. 2011. *Cosmopolitan Criticism and Postcolonial Literature*. Basingstoke & New York: Palgrave.
- Tchumkam, Hervé. 2012. "Entre sex et peau: Tribulations de femmes chez Monique Ilboudo." *Nouvelles Études Francophones* 27 (2): 168-181. doi: 10.1353/nef.2013.0013.
- Thomas, Dominic. 2009. "New Voices, Emerging Perspectives." In *The Cambridge Companion to the African Novel*, edited by F. Abiola Irele, 217-241. Cambridge: Cambridge UP.
- Thompson, Chantal P. 2003. "The Myth of the Garden of Eden and the Symbolism of the Baobab Tree in West African Literature." In *Francophone Post-colonial Cultures: Critical Essays*, edited by Kamal Salhi, 90-101. Lanham: Lexington.
- Tibiri, Simon Pierre. 2012. "*Le mal de peau* de Monique Ilboudo: Un roman atypique ?" Sarrebruck: Editions Universitaires Européennes.

- Toivanen, Anna-Leena. 2011. "Retour au local: *Celles qui attendent* et l'engagement diasporique de Fatou Diome." *RELIEF- Revue électronique de littérature française* 5 (1): 62–77. <http://www.revue-relief.org/index.php/relief/article/view/URN:NBN:NL:UI:10-1-101689>
- Yeğenoğlu, Meyda. 2005. "Cosmopolitanism and Nationalism in a Globalized World." *Ethnic and Racial Studies* 28 (1): 103-131. doi: 10.1080/0141987042000280030.
- Young, Robert. J. C. 1995. *Colonial Desire. Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. London & New York: Routledge.

---

<sup>i</sup> For a criticism of Selasi's conception of what being an Afropolitan means, see Stephanie Santana's account on Binyavanga Wainaina's keynote address "I am a Pan-Africanist, not an Afropolitan" at the ASAUK conference in 2012 held at the University of Leeds.